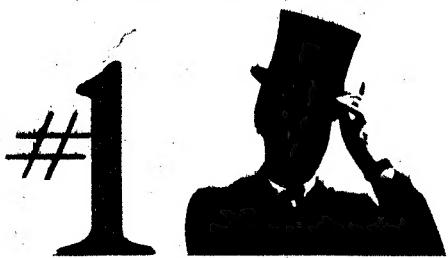


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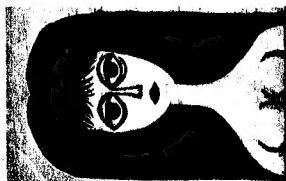


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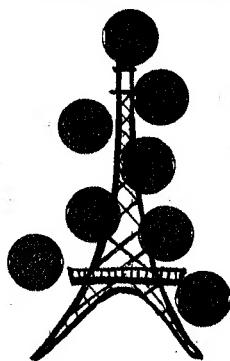
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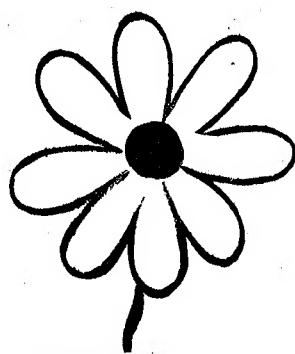
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MEET
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QUICK LONG WALK

JACK RITCHIE

*Terror filled Vincent's dream world . . .
he would die if he stepped off that curb . . .
so he waited—for over a century!*

There are dreams in which we observe ourselves, and Vincent's mind hovered above as he watched himself walking a strange street.

Vincent claimed that he dreamed little, if at all, but that was not true. He dreamed perhaps as much as anyone else, but his dreams were without character and therefore he always forgot them moments after awakening.

His sleep was not plagued by visions of disaster — no tidal waves engulfed him, no atom bombs brightened the horizon, no earthquakes toppled buildings upon his head. Vincent never even dreamed that he went walking without his trousers.

He was a quiet man and single to the point where all attempts to make a match for him had been abandoned. He maintained cordial relations with his married sisters and they always remembered to invite him for Christmas and Thanksgiving — taking turns. Vincent was not a bore, nor was he the sparkle of a conversation. He talked mildly, was mildly entertaining, and confined his subjects to people and things, since ideas were one dimension above him.

Vincent held a responsible, though non-executive, position with Reynolds Accounting. He always ate bland foods — though not

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THE LONG WAIT

(Continued from page 45)

through necessity — and he never traveled, because there was no place he particularly wanted to go.

Now he watched himself, a thin man dressed to the height of conservatism, carrying a scuffed black briefcase on this unknown street.

He saw a startled look come into his eyes. His steps faltered, and he continued walking slowly.

He looked at the stores he passed as though he were recognizing old landmarks — and yet he had never been on this street before. He stared almost incredulously at the jewelry shop with its display of silver plate, at the furrier's window with its tall mannequin, at the corner chain drugstore, its show window devoted to cigarette advertisements.

Vincent walked on almost unwillingly. And as he approached the corner, his face whitened.

The Vincent watching himself below frowned. He had never been frightened of anything in his life. Not that Vincent was fearless — far from that — but he simply had never experienced a moment when he *had* to be afraid of anything.

And now the Vincent below him was actually shaking, his face ashen, and his lips were trembling.

What is he afraid of, Vincent's mind wondered. Why should he be afraid?

The Vincent he observed stood at the curb for a moment — and then, as though he were almost pushed, he stepped into the street.

A black sedan, tires squealing, spun around the corner.

Vincent's hand went up as though to ward off the careening automobile and his mouth opened in a soundless shriek.

And then Vincent woke.
His heart was pounding, but Vin-

cent quickly reassured himself. It had been only a dream.

He lay in the darkness and his rational mind sought an explanation. His sister Agnes always dreamed of pink dresses whenever she ate chocolate. And Vincent too, believed that our dreams are largely the result of the state of our stomachs. We dream of some things when it is full, others when it is empty, and still others when it is distressed.

His mind dwelt on his meals of the day. No. There was nothing unusual at all. His stomach was at this moment, neither full nor empty, nor was it calling itself to his attention for a remedy.

Vincent yawned, put the entire matter out of his mind, and closed his eyes.

The dream occurred again and Vincent woke at precisely the same point.

He turned on the night light and frowned. This was frightfully annoying. He got up and went into the small kitchenette. He consumed several crackers and cheese.

There, he thought peevishly, that ought to do it.

He went back to bed.

The same dream came twice more before the alarm rang at seven-thirty.

As he always did, Vincent arrived at the office at seven minutes to nine.

Vincent was well-liked by the office girls, who were protective and motherly, and Mr. Reynolds approved of him too. Vincent was a sincere, meticulous worker, and he was not forward about asking for raises.

Vincent set to work at nine o'clock. But for the first time in years — not since he'd had that touch of

virus in '57 — he found his mind wandering.

Why should he dream something like that?

At the twelve lunch break, the office emptied, but Vincent remained at his desk. He entertained a slight feeling of guilt over his day-dreaming and he determined to work at least another fifteen minutes to make up for any time he might have cost the company.

At ten after twelve, the door of Reynold's office opened.

"Oh," Reynolds said. "You still here?"

Vincent obviously was.

Reynolds looked about the empty office and then came to Vincent's desk. "Could you do me a little favor, Vincent? I'd have the office boy do it, but he's off with the rest of them."

"Of course, Mr. Reynolds."

Reynolds put a scuffed black leather briefcase on Vincent's desk. "This is Bramer's. He was here this morning and forgot it. His office is just around the corner and two blocks down. Do you know where it is?"

Vincent nodded. He had never been there, but he knew Bramer's address.

"Would you drop it off on your way to lunch?"

"Certainly, Mr. Reynolds," Vincent said. He stared at the briefcase thoughtfully.

When Reynolds returned to his office, Vincent put on his hat and coat. He touched the briefcase gingerly for a moment. Then he took a firm grip and put it under his arm.

Of course, he thought wryly, I've seen Bramer and this briefcase dozens of times before. The mind stores up little details and uses them at its convenience in dreams.

When he left the building, he turned east.

It was the first time he'd done that in the thirty-two years he'd worked for Reynolds. The cafeteria where he always had his lunch was in the opposite direction.

At the first corner he turned into Sixteenth Street.

It was a crisp, sunny fall day, and Vincent almost had the feeling of a new adventure as he walked.

And then he faltered.

He had never been on this street before. He was *positive* of that.

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THE LONG WAIT

(Continued from page 46)

And yet . . .

His eyes widened at the jewelry store with its display of silver plate. Impossible! And yet his heart quickened.

And there it was, too. The furrier's, and the mannequin draped in a marten stole.

The color drained from Vincent's face.

And the drugstore at the corner! Vincent came slowly to the curb.

He could *feel* that the black sedan would swing around the corner in a moment. He *knew* it was there — waiting to run him down!

Vincent trembled violently.

No!

No! No!

I'm not going to let it happen!

Vincent was watching himself now and he saw an ashen-faced man frozen at the curb.

Nothing moved!

Across the street two women who had been talking to each other were now statues, their mouths caught at the formation of the next word.

Was this a dream again? The same dream? Was he really still in his bed at home?

A bus stood at the curb. A gray-hatted man had just been at the point of stepping out. His foot was still poised in the air.

Vincent giggled to himself hysterically. This *must* be a dream. Could he see around the corner? Could he see where the automobile lay waiting to run him down?

No.

He couldn't move from this place — this point where he hovered watching himself.

He noticed the messenger boy slightly to his left. He probably could see the car. Were the boy's eyes a little wide?

This *must* be a dream. It *had* to be.

Was there silence?

No. And yet, not noise either.

And Vincent realized with a feeling of terror that there *was* noise. But nothing moved.

A leaf, ragged and dry, hung suspended forever in the air.

Forever!

I've stopped it! I've stopped everything!

I'm not going to die. I will never die!

He stared down at himself, at the messenger boy, at the two women, at the passenger so ludicrously poised in the bus doorway, and at the leaf caught in mid air.

He laughed exultantly.

Immortality!

The leaf settled to the pavement

and the messenger boy's eyes widened as he saw what was coming.

Vincent, shaking and white-faced, stepped into the street.

The black sedan, tires squealing, swerved around the corner.

Vincent's hand went up as though to ward off the careening automobile and his mouth opened in a soundless shriek.

He heard the screams of the two women and closed his eyes.

And then there was silence.

Or *almost* silence.

Vincent felt a hand on his arm and opened his eyes.

The sedan had braked to a sliding stop inches from him.

The messenger boy helped him back to the curb and whistled almost reverently. "That was *close*, mister. Another inch and you would have had it."

Vincent stared at the sedan as the shaken driver put it into gear and drove away.

Vincent's eyes widened with horror.

If I had only known!

The loneliness! The terrible, terrible loneliness!

And then the traffic moved on.

After one hundred and seventy-six years!

